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Longing: places I desired and couldn't find

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LONGING: PLACES I DESIRED AND COULDN'T FIND

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

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By
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ABSTRACT

Ephemeral. Nostalgic. Absence. Transient. Transformation. Movement. Temporary. Skeleton. Momentary. Fleeting. Landscape. Cityscape. Southern Landscape. Baton Rouge. Louisiana.

I paint the feeling of wearing time and the earth on my skin. The scars on the landscapes tell stories and truths marked by past generations. The imagery in my work is inspired by local places and reveals the wavering condition of the natural landscape and civilizations. Everyday places and repetitive acts make up the components of miracles. As I create, I examine ideas beyond the current condition of a specific location. Through my imagination I bring the unseen into the artworks. The ephemeral landscape is not painted in its true form, it transforms with moving colors, lines, and shapes. It is still identifiable, but is transitioning into the unknown element. This element could be a geological event, or a movement from the physical to the landscape's inner spirit. This body of work conveys a spiritual longing inspired by the temporary nature of everyday surroundings.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout graduate school I have maintained several journals where I have kept records of ideas for artworks, stories, inspiration and poems. Some of the content in this thesis was taken from the journals to reveal the influences and the processes for making the artwork.

PLACE OF CULTURE AND SPIRIT

Grandmother sang hymns and played piano with Hank Williams' band at family reunions and local churches. Her love for hymns, gospel and country music provided words of comfort and hope during a financially stressful time. When I hear lyrics like "we went down by the river to pray studin' about that good ol' way and who shall wear the thorny crown good Lord show me the way," I envision the rural farmland near Josie, Alabama where my grandmother's family were sharecroppers. My dad once said, "Josie hasn't really existed for some time now, no one lives there; it is not even a town". I imagine Josie as a dry farmland, almost a desert with more weeds than sugar cane. As I paint I listen to music from my grandmother's cassette tapes. I reflect on the past and perceive the landscape as a visual language of the seen and unseen.

Before graduate school, my cousin, Chase and I walked down a dirt road to our great-grandmother Caraway's house in Louisville, Alabama. The white house stood out among the rich green farm land. Her home was abandoned after she passed away. Nature began to take over the house; so much that we were not allowed to walk into it. Years later, Chase and I finally were given permission to explore the house. I followed him into the old home. Wild foliage was growing inside, areas of the floor and wall had fallen. We could now see the logs used to build the house. The most bizarre experience was walking around a vacant home still containing furniture and cupboards with dishes inside. I regretfully took a potato masher and flour shaker. I do not know why my grandparents left everything in its place, but I felt disobedient to them and to the ghostly space. Based on this event I tend to develop a personal connection to abandoned buildings; they encourage me to write and make art. Abandoned buildings are not always present in the artworks. The scars on buildings are from nature and man, revealing time and change. This content is consistent in all of the work.

In the fall of 2008, I drew a panoramic observation-based drawing of a steel building my dad was building in Auburn, Alabama. The work site was enormous and so my dad had to clear a field and level the earth from dense woods. The orange-red dirt held the steel skeleton inside a rich green forest. This influenced a poem I would write the following semester titled, "Steel Skeleton." During my childhood years, my dad left gigantic steel beams in our yard. They would eventually rust and be covered by grass. You could say I saw the birth and death of nature and man-made creation. The steel skeleton in my poem embodies the mortality of man. The key in the landscape declares man's flesh and even our imagination as fleeting. Even nature is impermanent through its constant transitional state. The rich colors of green, orange-red and silver made my dad's building appear to be everlasting. While writing the poem I began to recall the yard of my childhood. Afterwards, I saw holes in the forest, a field and the future building.

Steel Skeleton

We meander around the tall verticals.
It's almost hidden in the ivy
Walking underneath the steel skeleton we are children.
We have questions like children.
What would this unfinished cage have been?
Who conjured it up in their desire only to see it empty and raw?
Looking at each other we can describe our appearance
The same as our town

The same as the other buildings that encompass the steel mystery
Earth-worn, Dated, and Re-worn

We could not have foreseen the loss that would be handed to us from our fathers and mothers.
And they could not have thought of a reason to conserve their appetite for growth.
This steel skeleton would not be...
So we escape into our youthful hearts.
Our wealth is love.
Would we be this fortunate if not for our fathers and mothers?
History's warnings are almost covered in earth once more.
Who will our children become?

LITERARY INFLUENCES

2 Corinthians and *Absence and Light*

John R. Campbell's *Absence and Light* and Paul the Apostle's *2 Corinthians* are two books that are insightful and have influenced the process of articulating my artwork. Both writers describe the feeling of wearing the Earth. Campbell comments that the sunlight on his skin helps him to be located on the Earth. He and Paul agree the Earth is transitory and wavering. Campbell focuses on what he sees around him and witnesses a collage of civilizations held together by an evolution. He wonders if somewhere in the mundane composition and repetitive acts of civilization are the components of miracles. This analysis of phenomenal effects occurring in the everyday events of life is beautiful and on the same path as my artwork. The alternative would be that miracles occur in only major events such as an apocalypse. He is looking from a distance, seeing the miracle of civilization on the crust of the Earth. The world seems minute and he is examining beyond his location but, also finding mankind's location over time. Campbell returns to the idea of miracles as repetitive acts of daily life.

Paul wrote that we live in earthly tents which will eventually be destroyed and believers have an eternal home with God. Paul explains the burdens felt on Earth are temporary. His burdens caused him to groan to be clothed in his heavenly dwelling. Paul knows that when he is clothed, he will not be found naked. Paul explains nakedness as the ephemeral flesh. Paul is a tent builder and lives mostly in tents on his travels. He uses this ordinary object as a metaphor for the human body because of its temporary nature. Paul perceives the culture he lives in is fleeting. He encourages believers to remember what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal.

This reminder by Paul intensely pushed the content of my artwork. How can I paint the physical as temporary and how can I paint the unseen? These questions demanded further research into other artists and the theme of the sublime. I wanted to paint an ephemeral landscape. The landscape would not be painted in its true color or form. The landscape needed to transform with moving colors, lines, and shapes. The landscape is still identifiable but, it is transitioning into an unknown element. This element could be physical such as a geological event or a movement from the physical to the landscape's inner spirit.

After I read Campbell's book and *2 Corinthians* I found a verbal resolution to explain the focus of my artwork. These writers studied the places around them. For my recent body of work I focused on the Baton Rouge area. I examined the abandoned and lived-in areas, the river, and the unique trees and homes. For the past year and a half, I have taken photos and made drawings from observation all over the capital city area. In my studio these places that I can encounter become a place in transitional state. The landscapes are in a mental state of transformation not an actual chaotic end of the world event.

Lure of the Local

Lucy Lippard's book *Lure of the Local* has furthered my perception of land as a spiritual landscape. Lippard describes land as a distinct spatial and spiritual element just as much as a place for habitation. She explains how land is "history, culture, community, and religion."

Lippard writes “the spiritual landscape is part of the one we live in and also lies beyond it.” Physical landscapes can act as symbols for the invisible.

James V. Marshall’s novel, *Walkabout*, explains the Aborigines’ Walkabout is a spiritual journey through an outer landscape to find their inner landscape. This journey requires the young man to remove himself from civilization and walk in the wild for meditation. The content of my work is not the pursuit of soul searching through nature. However, I can understand and appreciate nature seen as spirit. The spiritual journey in my work is in and out of the inhabited landscape. I am expressing the temporary landscape as a spiritual landscape in places whether abandoned, functional or natural.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Historical Artistic Influences

Artists J. M. W. Turner and Casper David Friedrich are historical landscape painters that I often refer to for my artwork. Turner painted high contrast paintings with whimsical brush marks which evoked a transitional and atmospheric state. He painted passing storms that created an ephemeral atmosphere. Friedrich's sublime landscapes were based on church ruins that surrounded his nearby landscape. His paintings differ from Turner's because they are less about the experience and more about a state of meditation. My work possesses the movement of Turner's storms and includes contemporary structures that surround me, similar to Frederick's work. I have studied the color palette of both artists and incorporate similar color palettes depending on the place being painted.

Contemporary Artistic Influences

Contemporary artists Julie Mehretu, David Schnell, Angelina Gualdoni, and Todd Arsenault have influenced my paintings and drawings on panel. Mehretu's artwork has been a long time favorite of mine. The White Cube Gallery comments on her works, "points of departure are architecture and the city" and "her paintings present a tornado of visual incident where gridded cities become fluid and flattened." In my work I look for areas of departure in the landscape. I question where the landscape can transcend into another landscape in each work. Mehretu's work is flattened and contains a very graphic quality. These ideas mostly influenced my shaped panels and not my oil paintings. Schnell, Arsenault and Gualdoni are all painters that transform a city or landscape with oil paint. I look at their work to see the various methods of abstracting the landscape to convey the idea of place as temporary. Schnell's work breaks the image by using one point perspective. I refer to his work because of the way he separates the buildings and landscape from the horizon line into the sky. In my oil paintings the horizon often becomes ambiguous. Gualdoni painted a body of work based on an abandoned mall. She creates a dark atmosphere where the contemporary ruin appears to be floating in a void. There is a sublime quality to her work similar to Friedrich's paintings. In my paintings the landscape touches on the presence of a spiritual power. Arsenault paints chaotic cityscapes that break into fragmented shapes. He abstracts his subject matter with either loose brush marks or fragmented shapes. As Arsenault abstracts his paintings he doesn't lose the sense of a place in transition. We share the method of abstracting buildings and landscapes to change these places into a transitioning form.

DRAWINGS AND INSTALLATION

The panels were cut into cloud-like shapes to suggest the idea of a memory cloud or an atmospheric cloud that contains the image of a place. The shaped panels gave me the opportunity to work in a non-traditional gallery installation. The organic cut out shapes could cluster together or spread out. The shape for each panel has been developed from a series of sketches based on photographs. As I sketched from the photos, I looked for movement occurring in the composition. This movement is enclosed by the edges of the panel. The outside shape complements the movement in the sketches in a more simplified form.



*Blue Bonnet Blvd. and Nicholson Dr.
Intersection, 2009.*



Hasten for Autonomy near vibrant stage.

After creating the shape, I gesso the panel and begin drawing a contour outline of the place. The drawing is further developed with descriptive marks in the sky and ground. The drawings create a skeletal framework for color to move in and around, expressing the location's transitory nature. Half-way into the process the imagery reaches a vibrant stage. The colors are more than representational; the colors in this state indicate a mood or expression of the place. This stage is only temporary and is soon painted with a thin layer of white and gray. Most of the colorful paint and initial drawings disappear behind the white layer of paint. With graphite I redraw most of the original drawing on top of the last layer of paint. The lines indicate a way to mark the movement of time or atmosphere of the place. The minimal amount of color makes the artwork subtly fade into the white walls of my studio. For my exhibition I created more of an installation by painting areas of light gray directly onto the wall to show how the pieces can fade away into the white of the wall or stand out in the painted gray areas. The gray paint is in the shape of a gestural line. The line is wide stretching from four feet to two inches in some areas. The length for each line extends horizontally between fifteen to twenty feet. The line is organic and curves to the right similar to handwriting. The line could also reference a cloud. The painted wall and the shaped panel work to create an atmosphere of migration or movement within the space.

Towards the end of creating the shaped panel series I decided to keep the layers of color visible. Instead of painting a layer of white to make the landscape recede, I wanted to abstract the landscape to show it transforming into the unknown. This shift inspired the oil paintings on canvas. Abstracting the place with color, shapes and painterly movement, I compose the idea of nostalgia with the color palette and brush strokes instead of depending on a cloud-like shaped frame.



Hasten for Autonomy, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel, 11 x 22 inches, 2009



Enclosed Resurgence, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel, 15 x 19 inches, 2009



Colors of Imminence, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel 11 x 22 inches, 2009



No Horizon, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel 31 x 45 inches, 2009



Transient I, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel 13 x 20 inches, 2009



Undesirable Detracts II, Graphite, gouache and acrylic on panel 14 x 23 inches, 2009

PAINTINGS

In early December, I prepared to work on canvas. I drove to various places in the Baton Rouge area to draw from observation. Spending time at a specific location and documenting various perspectives inspired an inquisitive and imaginative process of free writing possibilities, questions, and developing a foundation for the artwork. This verbal exploration guided the element of transformation in the work. Color, layering, and mark-making have been the key elements for creating the narrative of a transforming landscape. Painting in oil moved my monochromatic color palette to include more color hues and less tints of white. Oil paint also loosened up my brushstrokes. The paintings are created in layers. The first few layers shift the landscape location and composition. As I paint a new layer I experience a metamorphosis of the landscape. This method of changing the landscape brought me closer to the work of investigating the landscape in spiritual terms. The loose and painterly marks around static forms in the landscape express a transitional nature.



The ruins of The Advocate, news building, in downtown Baton Rouge, 2009



Observation drawing of the The Advocate ruins, 2009



Early layer in Old Advocate, 2010



Old Advocate, Oil paint on canvas, 55 x 40 inches, 2010



Walk By, Oil paint on canvas, 55 x 40 inches, 2010



Loose Thread, Oil paint on canvas, 39 x 48 inches, 2010



Release, Oil paint on canvas, 32 x 23 ½ inches, 2010



Disperse, Oil paint on canvas, 48 x 34 inches, 2010

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Notched Ear

Granddaddy plowed his land
the dirt was dry and broken
We walked along the edge of the field
in the shade with plastic buckets
Mother knew we would want to
in our hands carved rock by Indians
A war between tribes
Here
Here underneath my feet
We lustfully gaze at the weapons
Questions mother listened to
She answered with blood

“Your ancestors are Cherokee
a tribe, a people, their way has been lost to us.
My grandmother her ear was notched.
She loved a white man.”

Ours buckets full of arrowheads
We imagine making the shiny glassy rocks and chalky rocks
into weapons for food and battle.
As we imagined we played.
Eventually we played them all back into the ground.

Where are the arrowheads
that we gave back to the earth?
This tangible is now a void.
Man built forts with no doors.
Nature hides the paths.
Through time’s wavering patterns
what was a whisper is now a hum.

I wrote the poem “Notched Ear” as I created this body of work. The poem is a personal example of my longing for places I could not find. As I paint I visually create a world that acknowledges every place and culture as only temporary. The spiritual landscape found within the physical landscape and within one’s own soul makes of a fleeting life a meaningful journey.

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The White Cube Gallery <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/>

VITA

Ashley Kathleen Bell was born in Alabama. Joann and Chris Caraway are her mother and step-father. Freddy and Sylvia Dykes are her father and step-mother. She is married to Weston Bell. Ashley grew up in Louisville, Auburn, and Dothan, Alabama. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Auburn University in 2006. A year later in 2007, Ashley entered Louisiana State University's Master of Fine Arts program. She plans to graduate in May of 2010.